



The head of Dr. Hill (David Gale) is kept alive by the re-animating fluid of Herbert West (Jeffrey Combs).

A MOIST Zombie Movie

A look at *The Re-Animator*,
a blood-drenched adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft.

By Dennis Fischer

Just as 1981 was the year of the werewolf, 1985 may become the year of the zombie. Zombie movies were revived in a big way after the release of *Dawn of the Dead*, but most of the pictures that capitalized on this success were low-budget Italian sleaze epics. There hasn't been that much in the way of home grown product...until now. The past year has seen the completion of not only George Romero's third (and possibly final) chapter in the "Living Dead" saga, *Day of the Dead*, but the production as well of Dan O'Bannon's alternate sequel *The Return of the Living Dead*, Sandy Howard's *The Supernatural*, the off-the-wall *Hard Rock Zombies*, and the surprise newcomer, *H.P. Lovecraft's Re-Animator*, to be released by Charles Band's Empire Pictures.

For those Lovecraft fans who can't re-

call any story by the chillmaster with that title, the film is actually an adaptation of Lovecraft's first series of stories called "Herbert West—Reanimator" for an obscure publication called *Home Brew*. The stories' only other appearance was in the 1965 collection *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales*.

Producer Brian Yuzna describes the original story and the way it was adapted to the screen. "H.P. Lovecraft's story takes place at Miskatonic University at the turn of the century," he says. "It has a very grisly, dark kind of feeling to it. The medical students there are digging up the dead and bringing the dead back to life. It goes on and on. It's a kind of serial. These guys grow up and it just continues and continues."

"What we did was we kind of condensed the elements, updated it, and

made it take place over a couple of weeks. Basically, it begins with old Dan Cain (Bruce Abbott) taking a corpse down into the morgue as a medical student, and while he's down there, he meets Herbert West (Jeffrey Combs). West is supposed to be helping Dr. Hill (David Gale), who's a big shot in the medical school because he brings in grants. They watch Dr. Hill use his laser drill on a corpse. Herbert West immediately attacks Dr. Hill and accuses him of being a plagiarist and having lifted ideas from a European. Dean Halsey (Robert Sampson) kicks West out of school.

"Herbert West moves in with Dan Cain, but Dan's girlfriend Meg (Barbara Crampton) takes an immediate dislike to him. Later, they find their cat dead in Herbert's refrigerator. Dan decides to go down and talk to Herbert, but when he

does so, he discovers Herbert using his re-animating serum to bring this horrible screaming creature back to life.

"Both Dan and Herbert get kicked out of medical school when Meg's father, the Dean, finds out that Herbert has been screwing around with this stuff, so the pair are determined to prove it works by going out to the morgue and bringing back a corpse we call Melvin, who is played by Arnold Schwarzenegger's double (Peter Kent), a really big guy. Melvin comes to life in the body room while Dean Halsey is beating on the door, and it smashes the door on Halsey and then throttles him and bites off his fingers. Herbert West does Melvin in with a bone saw, sticking it in through his chest. Halsey's been killed, but they bring him back before Meg comes in, so he's this horrible creature. The authorities think that he was the one responsible for this weird thing with the corpse, and they throw him into a padded cell with a strait jacket. He's become sort of a frothing, blood-blithering creature."

From there, the story, described by Yuzna, goes through a grisly succession of events, from decapitation to lobotomy, and leads up to a climax involving a zombie army. "And then..." says Yuzna, "well, you'll just have to see the picture."

Yuzna grins, thinking ahead to when people will be able to do just that. It's

been a long, hard haul to get the film through production. Originally, the property was considered as material for a play, which in turn was abandoned in favor of developing it as a mini-series. But the Herbert West stories proved to be too gruesome for television, and so it was finally settled that they should be made into a feature, at which point Yuzna came aboard to produce the project.

The director selected for the project was Stuart Gordon, a theatrical director from Chicago who has written and produced some 25 plays including play versions of *Sirens of Titan* and *Huckleberry Finn*. He did a three-part science-fiction play to be performed on three consecutive nights, called *Warp*, which went on to Broadway and later became a comic book. He also directed the original version of the play *E.R.*, which later became a television series starring Elliott Gould.

Yuzna describes Gordon as a "very talented guy and a real horror fanatic." *H.P. Lovecraft's Re-Animator* will mark his directorial film debut. Remarks Yuzna, "Stuart is such a talented director, though he had some trouble adapting to film because he really knew very little about the mechanics of filmmaking, but he's an incredibly fast learner and he's a very, very talented director of actors." According to Yuzna, the production has

aimed for "the sort of shock sensibility of an *Evil Dead* with the production values of, hopefully, *The Howling*."

A tall order, to be sure, especially since the budget is estimated to be just under a million dollars, far less than most of the other competitors in the zombie-film field. But then, Yuzna expects *Re-Animator* to be an energetic film. Unlike most movie zombies, the living dead in this film are not slow, shambling creatures. The re-animating fluid Lovecraft imagined is a sort of super-adrenaline, and so the living dead are almost super-charged. In fact, one of the opening makeup effects, devised by John Buechler, is a Cronenbergian eye-popping caused by overdosing a corpse with too much of the serum.

While Buechler was called in to handle the exploding head, plus an articulated version of a re-animated decapitated noggin, and three special corpses in Dr. Hill's zombie army, the main effects chores in the film were handled by Tony Doublin (mechanical) and John Naulin (makeup). Naulin has gone from managing the Shop of 1,000 Faces on the Universal Studios Tour to being manager of research and development at Don Post Studios for several years, and has since been teaching makeup and working on projects related to the entertainment industry including working on the *Stil*

Explosive effects not likely to be found in the original H.P. Lovecraft stories are commonplace in *The Re-Animator* (assuming, of course, that the ratings board doesn't run roughshod over it).



Director Stuart Gordon is proud of his film's attention to surgical detail.

suits for *Dune*. He headed a makeup crew which included Gerald Quist, John Criswell, Therese Shirley, Dana Ginzberg, Richard Davison, Jeff Seigal, Julie Manegers, Melonie Cleric and Richard McGuire.

Unlike the simple gray pallor that the undead have in many flicks, *Re-Animator* has some rather colorful zombies. John Naulin describes how this look came about. "Stuart, the director, had some disgusting shots brought out from the Cook County morgue of all kinds of different lividities and different corpses. We sat down with that and with a book of forensic pathology, and picked about eight or nine special colors that are not normally available with the makeups that we were using, and we had the makeup lab mix up some custom colors for us," he said. "The corpses in this film will reflect how a corpse actually looks once the blood has settled in the body." (After death, gravity causes blood to pool in the lowest portions of the body which in turn creates a variety of odd skin tones.)

When we ask Naulin how he would describe the effects in this film, he replies, "Moist. This is the bloodiest film I have ever worked on. I've been mixing up the blood on this film, and in the past I don't think I ever used more than a couple of gallons of blood on a single film, but on this one, when we're done, we'll have used 24 gallons."

"So far the stuff looks real good. We had some of our crewmembers that couldn't make it through some of the screenings, let's put it that way. What especially got them was the scene where David Gale, who plays the zombieified Dr. Hill, gets his head cut off with a shovel. I don't think this has ever been done where somebody, on camera, has a shovel shoved through a live actor's head and there's a live body that is still moving and kicking, and then the head rolls off, and it's still moving."

The headless Dr. Hill zombie was the biggest challenge in the film. Explains Naulin, "Most times somebody loses their head in a film, you see maybe a 100 frames of it and it's gone. We've got to carry 50 pages of it." The effect was achieved a number of ways, most of which were designed by Tony Doublin. Doublin explains that the problem wasn't "so much the body being headless, but the fact that you always run into the problem of what you do with the nine or 10 inches you lose when you lose somebody's head. If you go up with the shoulders, the crotch and the arms become all distorted, and all the proportions go to hell. I'd seen *The Dark* where this guy's head was pulled off, and it looked like a midget in a fiberglass body, but it didn't stumble around quite as



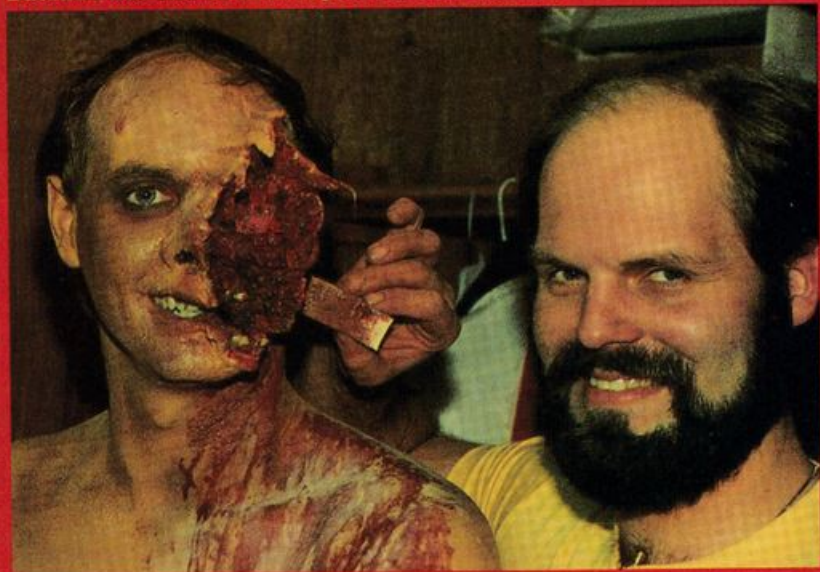
badly. Each scene we had to use a different technique." One technique that proved quite effective was building an upper torso that an actor could bend over and stick his head through so that his head appeared to be the head that the walking corpse was carrying around.

To keep Hill's head alive, it frequently sits in a pan of blood to get its blood supply replenished. This required numerous scenes where David Gale had to sit with his head sticking up into a bloody pan while blood dribbled down

the cracks in the opening. While this effect proved simple to do, it was quite uncomfortable for the actor. Well, nobody said Hollywood was all glamour.

The big climax necessitated the most work. The various undead in Dr. Hill's zombie army had to be made up, plus effects rigged not only for Dr. Hill, but also exploding veins (caused by an overdose of the serum) and burn effects. In addition, there were Buechler's three special corpses: one of a motorcycle accident victim who looked like he skid for

Although most of the makeup effects were handled by John Naulin, John Buechler was also on hand to produce a few horrors.



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awhile; a failed operation that had been stuck in a body bag without the doctors bothering to remove the hospital tubes or put his guts back into his abdomen; and a third corpse, nicknamed "Gesundheit," which was supposedly the victim of a close range shotgun blast at the back of his head which blew off the front of his face and left a gaping orifice which has hardened and dried.

Robert Sampson, who plays Dean Halsey in the film, had some personal experience in what it's like playing a zombie. He describes the film as "the most fun I ever had," going on to explain that it allowed him to indulge in "the wildest fantasies I've ever had as a child, of scaring people, of doing all those things that I wasn't allowed to see when I was a kid. I was not allowed to see the scary *Frankenstein* movies and all that stuff. My parents were afraid that it might do a number on me, so I would sneak out to go see them. And now I've had the opportunity to do one. I did a *Twilight Zone* and a *One Step Beyond* that were similar to this, but they weren't as rich, as thought-out."

Halsey goes on to describe what happened when a corpse was injected with the re-agent. "They inject it at the base of the skull, and what it does is, it's like sticking your finger in a light socket. You just go *Ahhh!* There isn't any control. You turn into just this mad, re-animated thing.

"There's a scene where I'm in a padded cell, and I have a strait jacket on, and my daughter doesn't understand what's happened to me.

"So she is standing there talking to this evil doctor standing behind this one-way mirror. It's a mirror on my side and a window on his side, and he's trying to seduce her. He turns and looks and can't find me at all. All of a sudden, I'm gone. But, as he's making a move for her, I bang my head against the window. Now I don't know why I'm doing this, but I still have a sense of feeling. The timing of it is so weird, because I just come up and bam!

"Stuart Gordon has this off-the-wall sense of humor that I didn't even know was there until I went to see the first dailies. I was shocked by his macabre sense of humor, but it comes out of the reality of the situation. He has everybody playing it very serious, and the humor comes out of these seemingly normal people in this bizarre circumstances."

Along with his unusual sense of humor, Stuart Gordon also has some very definite ideas about the gruesome theme of the film. He agrees with Stephen King's statements that horror films basically deal with the fear of death. Says Gordon, "What this film is about is conquering death. I mean, Herbert West's dream is something that all doctors have shared, and that is to prolong life as long as you possibly can. It used to be believed that when your heart



The headless Dr. Hill assumes a clever disguise to get past hospital security guards.

stopped, you were dead. Now they have drugs like epinephrine which is an adrenaline derivative which can start the heart after it's stopped. They use fibrillators and electric shock to make the heart start again, so now the stopping of the heart does not necessarily mean you're dead. Now what they're calling death is defined as 'brain death,' which happens six to 12 minutes after the heart stops.

"West is trying to conquer brain death. What he is trying to do is prolong that six or 12 minutes as long as he possibly can so that a person who has died, even though their brain has never received any blood or oxygen, he can be brought back. His attitude is the same as any doctor's, that it's better to save a life even if it means the person is going to be debilitated, than to let the person die. Even if there is brain damage, it's still better to have that person living than dead, so under that philosophy, his approach is medically correct."

Gordon hopes that while watching these bizarre, bloody experiments, audiences will get involved with the film's characters. "I've seen many horror films where you don't care about anybody, and that to me sort of sinks the film. If you're not afraid for someone, you're not afraid. It's important. I think that one of the things that we've really got going for us is that we really have some wonderful actors in this film who are giving spectacular performances. When things happen to them, I think the audience is going to really care, and they're going to really feel bad about a lot of it—and horrified."

